

Africa: The Passing of the Golden Ages

By John Henrik Clarke (May 1988)

1. The early beginnings

It can be said with a strong degree of certainty that Africa has had three Golden Ages. The first two reached their climax and were in decline before Europe as a functioning entity in human society was born. Africa's first Golden Age began at the beginning with the birth of man and the development of organized societies. It is general conceded in most scholarly circles that mankind originated in Africa; this makes the African man the father and the African woman the mother of mankind

In his book *The Progress and Evolution of Man in Africa*, Dr. L.S.B. Leakey states that:

In every country that one visits and where one is drawn into a conversation about Africa, the question is regularly asked, by people who should know better: "But what has Africa contributed to world progress?" The critics of Africa forget that men of science today, with few exceptions, are satisfied that Africa was the birthplace of man himself, and that for many hundreds of centuries thereafter, Africa was in the forefront of all human progress.

In the early development of man, the family was the most important unit in existence. Through the years the importance of this unit has not changed. The first human societies were developed for reasons relating to the needs and survival of the family. The early African had to make hooks to catch fish, spears to hunt with, and knives. He searched for new ways of building shelter, gathering and raising food, and domesticating animals. Our use of fire today simply continues the process started by the early Africans the control of fire. In the making of tools that sets man apart from all living creatures, Africans started man along the tool-making path.

With the discovery of metals and how to use them all Africa took a great leap forward. Man had learned how to take iron from the ground and turn it into spears and tools. Iron cultures spread rapidly across Africa and there were very few parts of Africa that were not influenced by these Iron Age cultures. Iron cultures had their greatest development in the area of Africa that is now the Eastern Sudan, in the great city-state of Meroe. The use of iron accelerated every aspect of African development and introduced a new danger the eventual use of iron weapons in warfare.

2. The Nile Valley Civilization The Rise

The Nile River became a great cultural highway, bringing peoples and cultures out of inner Africa. These migrations by river led to the establishment of one of the greatest nations in world history Egypt. In his book *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.*, the Afro-American historian Chancellor Williams refers to Egypt as "Ethiopia's oldest daughter," and calls attention to the evidence to prove the southern African origin of early Egyptian people and their civilization.

Egypt first became an organized nation about 6000 B.C. Medical interest centers upon a period in the Third Dynasty (5345-5307 B.C.), when Egypt had an ambitious pharaoh named Zaser. Zaser, in turn had for his chief counselor and minister a brilliant commoner named Imhotep (whose name means "He who cometh in peace"). Imhotep constructed the famous step pyramid of Sakkarah near Memphis. The building methods used in the construction of this pyramid revolutionized the architecture of the ancient world.

Egypt gave the world some of the greatest personalities in the history of mankind. In this regard, Imhotep is singularly outstanding. In the ancient history of Egypt, no individual left a deeper impression than the commoner Imhotep. He was the world's first multi-genius. He was also the *real* father of medicine. In his book, *Evolution of Modern Medicine* (London, 1921, 9. 10), Sir William Osler refers to Imhotep as "the first figure of a physician to stand out clearly from the mists of antiquity."

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The period in Egyptian history from the Third Dynasty to the first invasion of Egypt by the Hyksas, of Shepherd Kings, in 1700 B.C. is, in my opinion, the apex of the first Golden Age. The Western Asian domination over Egypt lasted about one hundred and twenty years and was ended by the rise of Egyptian nationalism during the Seventeenth Dynasty. During this period the pharaohs (or kings) at Thebes consolidated their powers and began a united campaign to rid Lower Egypt of Hyksas invaders. When the invaders from Western Asia were finally driven out by the Pharaoh, Ahmose I, the splendid Eighteenth Dynasty was established and Egypt's second Golden Age began. Egypt's Golden Age did not belong to Egypt alone but included nations in Africa, mainly Kush and Ethiopia (which at certain periods in history were one and the same.) These nations farther to the south were the originators of the early culture of Egypt. Egypt at this juncture in history was no longer dependent on her cultural parents and was, once more, the most developed nation in the world.

3. The Nile Valley Civilization ➡ The Glory

Again rulers of monumental status were coming to power. Two of the best known rulers of this period were Queen Hatsheput and her brother Thothmes III. Great temples were built throughout the country, and the consequent employment of hundreds of artist and craftsmen prepared the way for the artistic glories, which were still to come.

During the reign of Thothmes III, the influence of Egypt was once more extended to Western Asia, now referred to as the Middle East. The age of grandeur continued. This age had a dramatic and lasting change in 1386 B.C. Some time around 1386 B.C., Queen Tiy of Egypt gave birth to a boy who was first named Amenhates after his father. Very little is known of his childhood except that he was sickly from birth and developed an interest in art, poetry, and religion. His closest companion was said to be Nefertiti, the beautiful little cousin. (Some archaeologists have referred to her as his sister.)

When the Crown Prince was about 21, he and the lovely Nefertiti were married. Three years later, his aging father, Amenhotep III, Named him co-regent of Egypt and crowned him Amenhotep IV. After the death of his father, he came into full power in Egypt and took the name Akhenaton. He produced a profound effect on Egypt and the entire world of his day.

Akhenaton, often referred to as "The Heretic King," is one of history's most extraordinary monarchs. Thirteen hundred years before Christ he preached and lived a gospel of love, brotherhood, and truth. He has been called the world's first idealist, the first temporal ruler ever to lead his people toward the worship of a single God.

When Akhenaton came to the throne more than 3,000 years ago, Egypt dominated the world.

Egypt's Golden Age gradually waned and the pride and splendor that had marked the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties gave way to internal strife and confusion. Wars of conquest and colonization had drained much of her military and economic strength. In the meantime, as the nations to the south grew more powerful, they became predatory toward Egypt, which had once been their master.

The nation that is now called Ethiopia came back upon the center stage of history around 900 B.C. It was then represented by a queen who in some books is referred to as Makeda, and in others as Belkis. She is better known to the world as the Queen of Sheba. In his book, *World's Great Men of Color*, J.A. Rogers gives this description: "Out of the mists of three thousand years emerges this beautiful love story of a black queen, who, attracted by the fame of a Judean monarch, made a long journey to see him. ♠"

In *Ethiopia, A Cultural History*, Sylvia Pankhurst tells the story of this journey:

The history of the Queen of the South, who undertook a long and arduous journey to Jerusalem, in order to learn of the wisdom of King Solomon, is deeply cherished in Ethiopia, as part of the national heritage, for she is claimed as an Ethiopian Queen, Makeda, "a woman of splendid beauty," who introduced the religion and culture of Israel to her own land."

By the tenth and ninth centuries B.C., Egypt had been weakened by outside attacks and by bitter disputes between its priests and the royal families. This had allowed the Kushites to the south to gain a measure of independence. They now had the confidence to move northward and conquer their former masters. In spite of the war of conquest, these Kushite (or Ethiopian) kings brought Egypt her last age of grandeur and social reform. There is a need to make a serious study of this act of internal African colonialism and what it achieved at the end of the Golden Age for both Egypt and Kush.

These Kushite kings restored the declining culture and economy of Egypt and took this nation to unprecedented heights of leadership in the way it cared for its people. Though a colony, Egypt was once more a world power.

4. The Nile Valley Civilizations ♦ The Decline

The Assyrian invasion of 871 B.C. drove the Kushite forces to the south and began the harshness and misrule that destroyed the grandeur that once was Egypt. Egypt continued to decline while a young nation on the other side of the Mediterranean ♦ Greece ♦ began to gather, its power around 500 B.C. In the year 332 B.C. Alexander the Great, a student of Aristotle, invaded Egypt. This was the first purely European invasion of Africa. The aftermath of this invasion, and the new European interest in dominating the trade of the Mediterranean world, led to the Punic Wars and the invasion by the Romans.

In Egypt a strong and shrewd young girl tried to deal with the plight of her country under the threat of Roman domination. Her name was Cleopatra.

More nonsense has been written about Cleopatra than about any other African queen, mainly because it has been the desire of many writers to paint her white. She was not a white woman, she was not a Greek. Let us dispose of this matter before explaining the more important aspects of her life. Until the emergence of the doctrine of white superiority, Cleopatra was generally pictured as a distinctly African woman, dark in color. Shakespeare in the opening line of "Anthony and Cleopatra" calls her "tawny." In his day, mulattos were called "tawny Moors." The word "Moor" came into the European languages meaning black or blackamoor. In the *Book of Acts*, Cleopatra describes herself as "black."

Born in 69 B.C., Cleopatra came to the throne that she shared with her brother, Ptolemy XIII, when she was 18 years old. Egypt, now a Roman protectorate, was beset with internal strife and intrigue. Cleopatra aligned herself with Julius Caesar, who reinforced her power. Their political and sexual relationship was a maneuver to save Egypt from the worst aspects of Roman domination. After Julius Caesar was murdered, Cleopatra, still in her early twenties, met Mark Anthony and a love affair strongly motivated by politics began.

Her effect on Mark Anthony was profound. This noble Roman turned traitor to his own people when he attempted to save the country of this fascinating black queen from Roman domination. After Anthony's death, the victor, Octavius, assumed full control of Egypt, and Cleopatra, now without a protector or champion, committed suicide.

After Cleopatra's death, Egypt became a Roman colony and the harsher aspects of Roman rule settled over Egypt and the Middle East. To the south, in the lands untouched by Rome, new proud civilizations were rising. And in the centuries that followed, black women once again began to play major roles in the theatre of history.

Lights of achievement did shine in other parts of Africa, though the second Golden Age was over.

The more ruthless aspects of Roman rule made African and Middle Eastern people question old gods and search for new ones. This led to the development of Christianity and subsequently Islam. From the beginning these were religions of the oppressed.

When the oppressor, the Romans, stopped killing Christians and became "Christian" the religion was

dramatically changed. Their misuse of this religion and widespread dissatisfaction in the Roman colonies of North Africa and the Middle East facilitated the rise of Islam.

5. The Civilizations of the Western Sudan ♦ Ghana

In the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. Roman rule began to lose its hold on North Africa and the Middle East. African genius for state building and for bringing new societies into being was reborn in the Western Sudan (inner West Africa), where the third and last African Golden Age began.

The first of the great empires of the Western Sudan to become known to the outside world was Ghana. It began as a small settlement during the second century of the Christian era. It would later develop into a state with a known history of more than a thousand years. In Europe and in the Arab countries, Ghana was known as a country rich in gold. This was a natural attraction for the Arabs and later the Europeans. The country reached the height of its greatness during the reign of Tenkamenin, one of its greatest kings, who came to power in 1062 A.D. The king lived in a palace of stone and wood which was built to be defended in time of war. The Empire was well organized. The political progress and social well being of its people could be favorably compared to the best kingdoms and empires that prevailed in Europe at this time. The country had a military force of 200,000 men.

In one of a number of holy wars, or Jihads, Ghana was invaded by the Almaravides under the leadership of Abu Bekr of the Sosso Empire in 1076 A.D. This conquest brought as end to Ghana's age of prosperity and cultural development. The character of the country was slow to change. Nearly a hundred years later the Arab writer, El Idrisi wrote of it as being said: "Ghana ♦ is the most commercial of the black countries. It is visited by rich merchants from all the surrounding countries and from the extremities of the West."

In 1087 the country regained its independence, without regaining its old strength, state organization, and grandeur. The ruins of the Empire of Ghana became the Kingdoms of Diara and Sosso. The provinces of Ghana became a part of the Mali Empire and were later absorbed into the Songhai Empire.

The great drama of state building, trade and commerce, and power brokerage unfolded at Timbuctoo, the queen city of the Western Sudan.

Two hundred miles down the Niger from Timbuctoo the competing city of Gao stood. It was founded about the seventh century and was the capital of the large black empire of Songhai. Like Timbuctoo, it was in a favorable position for the Trans-Saharan trade, in the days of the regular caravans from North Africa. Like Timbuktu, the greatest days of Gao came in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

In the years when Timbuctoo was the great intellectual nucleus of the Songhai Empire, African scholars were enjoying a renaissance that was known and respected through most of Africa and in parts of Europe. At this period in African history the University of Sankore was the educational capital of the Western Sudan. In his book, *Timbuctoo the Mysterious*, Filix DeBois gives us the following picture:

The scholars of Timbuctoo yielded in nothing to the saints and their sojourns in the foreign universities of Fez, Tunis and Cairo. They astounded the most learned men of Islam by their erudition. That these Negroes were on a level with the Arabian savants is proved by the fact that they were installed as professors in Morocco and Egypt. In contrast to this, we find that the Arabs were not always equal to the requirements of Sankore.

6. The Civilizations of the Western Sudan ♦ Mali

The famous Emperor of Mali, Manca Mussa, stopped at Timbuctoo on his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. He went in regal splendor with an entourage of 60,000 persons, including 12,000 servants. Five hundred bondsmen, each of whom carried a staff of pure gold, marched in front of the Emperor. Two hundred

eighty camels bore 2400 pounds of gold which this African monarch distributed as alms and gifts. Mussa returned from Mecca with an architect who designed imposing buildings in Timbuctoo and other parts of his realm.

To the outside world, of the late medieval period, the Emperor Manca Mussa was more than an individual. He was Africa. He conquered the Songhai Empire and rebuilt the University of Sankore. He figured, by name, on every map. In his lifetime he became in person the symbol of the mystery and of the fabulous wealth of the unknown African continent. He was the most colorful of the black kings of the fourteenth century. He still held this position nearly two centuries after his death.

7. The Civilizations of the Western Sudan ♦ Songhai

After the death of Manca Mussa, the Empire of Mali declined in importance. Its place was taken by Songhai, whose greatest king was Askia the Great (Mohammed Toure). Askia came to power in 1493, one year after Columbus discovered America. He consolidated the territory conquered by the previous ruler Sonni Ali and built Songhai into the most powerful state in the Western Sudan. His realm, it is said, was larger than all Europe.

The German writer, Henry Barth, in his famous work *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa*, calls Askia the Great "one of the most brilliant and enlightened administrators of all times." He reorganized the army of Songhai, improved the system of banking and credit, and made the city-states of Gao, Walta, Timbuctoo, and Jenne into intellectual centers. Timbuctoo during his reign, was a city of more than 100,000 people, "people filled to the top," says a chronicler of that time, "with gold and dazzling women."

Askia encouraged scholarship and literature. Students from all over the Moslem world came to Timbuctoo to study grammar, law, and surgery at the University of Sankore; scholars came from North Africa and Europe to confer with learned historians and writers of this black empire. A Sudanese literature developed and many books were written. Leo Africanus, who wrote one of the best known works on the Western Sudan, says: "In Timbuctoo there are numerous judges, doctors, and clerics, all receiving good salaries from the king. He pays great respect to men of learning. There is a big demand for books in manuscript, imported from Barbary (North Africa). More profit is made from the book trade than from any other line of business."

Askia has been hailed as one of the wisest monarch of the Middle Ages. Alexander Chamberlain, in his book, *The Contribution of the Negro to Human Civilization*, says of him: "In personal character, in administrative ability, in devotion to the welfare of his subjects, in open-mindedness towards foreign influences, and in wisdom in the adoption of enlightened ideas and institutions from abroad, King Askia was certainly the equal of the average European monarch of the time and superior to many of them."

8. The Civilizations of the Western Sudan ♦ The Decline

After the death of Askia the Great in 1538, the Songhai Empire began to lose its strength and its control over its vast territory. When the Songhai Empire collapsed after the capture of Timbuctoo and Gao by the Moroccans in 1591, the whole of the Western Sudan was devastated by the invading troops. The Sultan of Morocco, El-Mansur, had sent a large army with European firearms across the Sahara to attack the once powerful empire of Songhai. The army did not reach Timbuctoo until 1591. The prosperous city of Timbuctoo was plundered by the army of freebooters. A state of anarchy prevailed. The University of Sankore, which had stood for over five hundred years, was destroyed and the faculty exiled to Morocco. The greatest Sudanese scholar of that day, Ahmed Baba, was among those exiled. Baba was a scholar of great depth and inspiration. He was the author of more than forty books on such diverse themes as theology, astronomy, ethnography, and biography. His rich library of 1600 books was lost during his expatriation from Timbuctoo.

Timbuctoo provides the most terrible example of the struggles of the West African states and towns as they

strove to preserve what was once their Golden Age. The Arabs, Berbers and Tuaregs from the north showed them no mercy. Timbuctoo had previously been sacked by the Tuaregs as early as 1433 and they had occupied it for thirty years. Between 1591 and 1593, the Tuaregs had already taken advantage of the situation to plunder Timbuctoo once more. Between 1723 and 1726 the Tuaregs once more occupied and looted Timbuctoo. Thus Timbuctoo, once the Queen City of the Western Sudan, with more than two hundred thousand inhabitants and the center of a powerful state, degenerated into a shadow of its former stature.

Now, West Africa entered a sad period of decline. During the Moorish occupation wreck and ruin became the order of the day. When the Europeans arrived in this part of Africa and saw these conditions they assumed that nothing of order and value had existed in these countries. This mistaken impression, too often repeated, has influenced the interpretation of African and Afro-American life in history for over four hundred years.

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